

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi
External Institutional Evaluation Report
May 2022

Introduction

I was invited by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) to join the evaluation team for the institutional evaluation of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi (UAIC). Prior to the site visit, I had studied the English version of the Self-Evaluation Report (SER) of the UAIC and some other documents. During the visit, which was carried out on-site from 4th to 6th of May 2022, I had a very good opportunity to build upon the information I had received about the UAIC and its operation.

The site visit started with a preliminary meeting of experts, who are the members of the evaluation team. At this meeting, a preparation and harmonization of evaluation stages was discussed. Then, there was a meeting with the leading representatives of the UAIC. During the whole period of evaluation, I had a chance to participate in several plenary/group meetings with representatives of the UAIC teaching staff, students, alumni and also the employers of graduates of the UAIC. Besides, a series of individual meetings, as well as group discussions with representatives of various positions within the UAIC and beyond followed during the site visit. Individually, I met representatives of the UAIC executive management (vice-rectors in charge of different agendas of the operation of the UAIC), president of the UAIC Senate, the staff in charge of research, international relations, quality assurance, members of the Ethic Committee, students, graduates, and some other relevant persons.

During the site visit, I received additional documents related to some aspects of the operation of the UAIC upon my request, which helped me to complete the image. Thanks to this, I had a chance to study materials related to leadership, management and governance, budgeting, study provision, research, internationalization, external relations, quality assurance and many other aspects of the operation of the UAIC for the purpose of its evaluation. Since the visit was organized on-site, I also had a very good possibility to see the main premises of the UAIC.

I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Sorin Alecsa, an ARACIS officer, for his very helpful support throughout the evaluation process. I also benefited from a highly collegial approach of the whole group of evaluators led by Prof. Lucian Ciolan, the head of the mission and Prof. Vasilica Stan, the coordinator of the expert evaluators’ team. I would also like to thank Prof. Florin Brinza, the vice-rector of the UAIC, for his effort to arrange what I needed for my work and to Dr. Sorina Chiper, the interpreter, for her very helpful assistance throughout the whole visit. All these activities were very helpful.

On the basis of the sources of information mentioned above, I herewith submit my report on the UAIC’s institutional performance as I have perceived it. I am aware that this is a limited view by an external evaluator, and a much deeper insight would be needed to really catch the essence of some of the issues evaluated. My evaluation, as well as my recommendations for possible consideration, should be understood as a collegial attempt to provide the UAIC and ARACIS with opinions with the aim to contribute to possible improvements at the UAIC and the quality assurance of the higher education in Romania.

Mission statement

The UAIC is a well-established comprehensive university which was founded in 1860.

The mission statement of the UAIC relates to all the three main pillars which each higher education institution should have – teaching, research/development, and public reach (the third role). In particular, the UAIC declares the mission “to contribute to the development and dissemination of knowledge to future generations; to educate for the exercise of professions and functions, in the spirit of Truth and Good; to preserve and extend the expressions of scientific and cultural creation; to promote the ideas of a free society for the purpose of development” (SER, p. 7).

The vision statement of the UAIC positively correlates with its mission statement. Specifically, the vision of the UAIC consists of: “acquiring and enhancing universal knowledge in science, liberal arts and culture; passing on the heritage of knowledge to future generations; cultivating the mind in the spirit of independent thinking, respect for human excellence and endowing the ability to play a role in society; hoarding and affirmation of perennial cultural creations”. (SER, p. 7)

It may be concluded, the mission of the UAIC appears to have a potential to serve as a basis for strategic planning at the UAIC.

The Strategic Plan of the UAIC for the period 2021-2024 relates to all the main areas/aspects of the institution’s operation and it is elaborated in the structure Objectives – Directions of actions and Specific measures – Performance indicators. There is a clear interconnection among the mission, the vision and the strategy of the UAIC.

Academic freedom and academic integrity

The UAIC operates in the conditions of academic autonomy, academic freedom, emphasising free and equal access and public responsibility and accountability. The respect to academic freedom concerns the staff, as well as students.

The Code of Ethics is the main regulatory document in this field, and it has a guiding function too. Among other issues, it deals with situations of incompatibility and conflict of interest, as well as with measures related to academic fraud at different levels (Turnitin and Safeassign software have been in place to fight against plagiarism since 2016; antiplagiarism issue is an obligatory part of the curricula within study programmes).

The Ethics Commission is the main body dealing with this agenda, its reports are published annually. The Ethics Commission seems to be functioning well and it has sufficient support from the UAIC.

Overall, the bodies of the UAIC seem to be in compliance with legislation and they provide the faculties with the respective academic freedom.

Organisation and management

The UAIC has a number of regulatory documents, which determine organisation and management processes in the institution. The University Charter is the key document in this respect.

The UAIC is a relatively large institution with several units. At the moment, it has 15 faculties (further organized into departments), and 14 doctoral schools. The Interdisciplinary Research Institute is also a part of the UAIC. Currently, there are more than 25 thousand students at the UAIC in Iasi and its extensions.

While the rector/deans/heads of departments represent the executive processes in the institution, the university senate with a number of commissions form the self-governing bodies within the institution. Yet also the senate consists of some representatives of executive bodies (for instance the dean). The law makes this possible, yet the question remains whether this is a functional model.

The principles of the organization of the UAIC and its functioning are described in the SER and they provide a good basis for the main areas of institutional operation. The electoral regulations stipulate a transparent procedure for electing the leaders of the institution. The management system uses Internet, as well as Intranet information and communication systems.

Students are represented in consultative, decision-making and executive structures within the UAIC.

The UAIC operates on the basis of a 5-year strategy (medium-term), and as already mentioned above, its current strategic plan (2021-2024) seems to be a solid guidance for its institutional development. Annual operational plans seem to complement it.

Internal controls focused on main areas of the operation of the UAIC, its “legality, regularity, economy, efficiency and effectiveness” (SER, p. 10) are in place.

Recommendation:

- *Consider the possibility of having the senate without academics who at the same time exercise executive functions at the UAIC/its faculties.*

Academic programmes and student management

The UAIC has been realising a large number of study programmes at different levels within a number of study domains. There are 83 undergraduate and 122 master’s degree programmes. Within 14 doctoral schools there are 27 doctoral and postdoctoral fields.

The information about the programmes is published, and the UAIC either organizes, or participates in some special events to market its offer (typically, education fairs). The admission procedures seem to be in accordance with the legislation.

The academic programmes are in correspondence with the UAIC's mission statement, as well as with international standards. The quality, range and academic aims of the curriculum may be viewed as appropriate for the awarded academic degrees, there is a combination of professional, as well as transversal knowledge and skills presented in the programmes. The programmes seem to be well thought out and they are regularly monitored, evaluated and updated.

The rules related to the assessment of student results throughout all study phases are clear and publicly accessible too.

Students' study paths have a certain degree of flexibility.

The final works of students contain scientific and an applied research component.

Student support services seem to be provided sufficiently in most cases. Staff contact hours, tutors for each study group/year of study, and mentors are significant measures regularly implemented at the UAIC. The units of Service for Students, Career Guidance, and Professional Insertion seem to be an important structure in this respect, too. During the site visit interviews, students mostly voiced a positive view of the support they had been given by the university. One exception was indicated by some students of psychology – apparently, these students were involved in a conflict which takes place there among the staff.

There is a large number of student associations with a highly relevant agenda. It appears, they would often welcome more support in terms of finance and infrastructure from the side of the UAIC – despite the existence of the university fund for the support of extra-curricular activities.

Some students also mentioned an occasional lack of materials for their laboratory sessions. Other ones advocated for the crediting of the volunteer activity of students and for better communication between university/faculties and the student associations.

The UAIC pays attention to the graduates and their employability in the labour market. During the meetings, employer representatives were positive about the UAIC graduates. Some of them highlighted, however, the need to re-consider some aspects of the UAIC operation – for instance, teaching practice for student teachers to be organized also in small places/schools in the countryside; the need for a clearer framework for the cooperation between employers and the UAIC; the need for more flexible curricula.

Recommendations:

- *Pay attention to the conflict at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences and, if possible, make sure students are not drawn into the conflict situation among the staff members.*
- *Consider the possibility of providing student associations with some space for their operation (office).*
- *Make sure student activities of the associations are sufficiently funded by the UAIC and students have sufficient information about available funding.*
- *Consider a possibility to strengthen the links between university/faculties and student associations to improve mutual communication and cooperation (important especially*

after the covid-19 break).

- *Make sure employers have significant role in developing the study programmes, as well as other activities at the UAIC.*

Internationalisation

The international dimension in teaching, research and the public reach at the UAIC seems to be on a good level. The UAIC declares it collaborates with 574 universities in 68 countries (SER, p. 5).

Students (and also staff) can benefit from a number of international mobility opportunities, mainly within the Erasmus+ schemes. These relate not only to study exchanges, but also internship experience. This needs to be appreciated. Although the lower proportion of outcoming PhD students indicates a potential for improvement here.

The number of incoming students is not that high in comparison to outcoming students, and perhaps this could be seen as one of the potentials for further development. Apart from mobility students, there are, however, also international students studying the whole programme at the UAIC.

The institution under the evaluation has also some double- and joint-degree programme arrangements, and co-tutoring in PhD programmes –these are positive achievements too.

The UAIC organizes several summer schools which are open to international audiences.

The level of internationalisation of research at the UAIC is also good in a number of cases.

The International Office is in charge of most of the internationalisation agenda and this seems to be working well. Each faculty has at least one, sometimes even more Erasmus+ coordinators, too. A system of buddies (local student volunteers), who help incoming foreign students, is in place at the UAIC.

The international agenda falls under the responsibility of one of the vice-rectors.

Overall, the UAIC seems to be well internationally networked and anchored and this contributes to the international profile of its main activities.

Recommendations:

- *Consider the possibility of increasing the number of incoming mobility students (and staff) from other HE institutions from Romania and abroad.*
- *Consider the possibility of encouraging more PhD students for outcoming mobility (research and study stays).*

Research

Research is declared as one of the pillars of the UAIC's operation in the mission statement of

the institution. According to the vice-rector for research, about 30% of the income of the UAIC is generated by research activity.

Attention is paid to research development in strategic documents of the UAIC and annually, the institution seems to organize a high number of scientific sessions, symposia, conferences with national, as well as international participation.

There are some very strong research units and very prestigious research projects at the UAIC, at the same time, it appears the intensity of research work is not proportionally distributed across the institution.

It needs to be appreciated that the UAIC focuses on interdisciplinary research, on the transfer of technology and it also pays attention to supporting young people and their involvement in research, while having the ambition to accelerate and improve the social impact of research results.

Interdisciplinary research is supported by establishment of the Interdisciplinary Research Institute (which has two sections: social sciences/humanities, natural sciences). Three other research centres seem to be an important part of the infrastructure at the UAIC too.

Some internal grants for young researchers are provided by the UAIC annually (two-years projects, 40,000 lei), but the staff is encouraged to compete for the external funding of research. The table (SER, p. 41-43) indicates the main achievements of the institution in this respect (some of them relate to the projects of developmental nature, though).

Yearly financial bonuses are provided to best researchers (up to 25% of the salary).

The publications and other research results seem to be appreciated nationally, as well as internationally.

The UAIC publishes 49 scientific journals, which mostly serve for beginning researchers.

Efforts to include elements of research in teaching and involve students to some extent may be evaluated positively. Apart from this, there is evidence of the support provided by the UAIC to student research (small research grants, student research conferences and so on).

The UAIC is the HR Award holder as the first HE institution in the country.

Some employer representatives informed us about the development of research cooperation with the UAIC.

Overall, research is one of the pillars of the UAIC.

Recommendation:

- *Consider possibilities to achieve more proportional research activity/results across the UAIC.*

Staff

The UAIC has a qualified staff to provide the current portfolio of educational programmes as well other relevant activities.

According to the SER, there are 171 professors at the UAIC. The teaching staff consists of 714 teachers with a basic position at the UAIC, all with a PhD degree. There are also 698 associated teachers who carry out teaching activities for the 165 standardised teaching positions at the UAIC.

During the interviews, it appeared there are some staff development activities related mainly to teaching skills development, including online teaching. The academic staff is not trained in the supervision process.

Regular evaluations are an integral part of working with the staff. This includes a variety of evaluation methods, and they might have a potential to serve as a basis for possible improvements. During the interviews, some representatives of the younger generation of academic staff expressed their desire for a better balance between teaching and research expectation in their workload.

Students and alumni were mostly positive about the academic staff, as well as about the administration support.

Recommendations:

- *Make sure the training in supervision skills is in place as a development opportunity for the academic staff.*
- *Make sure the workload of each academic staff category is properly balanced, as for the teaching, research and the public reach.*

Finance and infrastructure/Premises and equipment

The UAIC's budget consists of the income from the state, as well as from other activities of the institution, such as sponsorships, donations, revenues from scientific research, design, consulting, expertise, and other sources of the UAIC activity. The annual budget is approved by the UAIC's Senate. Financial issues are coordinated by the Economic and Human Resource Department.

The UAIC provides some scholarship opportunities to the students. It has the responsibility for awarding scholarships and other forms of material support for students. Scholarships are provided from allocations from the state budget and/or from the institution's own resources. Students are also to some extent supported to participate in research programmes, scientific events, student competitions, publication activities.

As for full-time PhD students, the situation is similar to many other HE institutions – for many of these students their scholarship does not cover all the expenses and therefore they have to search for another source of income, while studying. This is even more complicated bearing in mind that full-time PhD students are entitled to receive the scholarship for only the first three years of their studies.

Financial management seems to be in line with the financial policy of the UAIC. Overall, the

financial-accounting activity of the UAIC seems to comply with the legislation and it is periodically a subject of internal, as well as external financial audits.

As for the infrastructure, the UAIC has its own spaces for teaching, research and the public reach. Apart from this, it also has a kindergarten and junior school, accommodation facilities (6,215 places) in four student campuses, incl. some hotel-regime dormitories. There are also dining areas, a library with a solid supply of relevant databases, some facilities for sports, and more.

During the meetings, some students were a bit critical about poor hygiene conditions in some dormitories (insects). Some other students advocated for more facilities for sport activities.

Several specific platforms (MEDIAEC, AMON, ARHEOINVEST) for student learning and research are also at the disposal to students of different programmes.

The UAIC has IT support for its main processes.

Recommendation:

- *Consider more possibilities to keep full-time PhD students focused on their study.*

Quality management

The quality assurance (QA) of the main processes is paid sufficient attention to at the UAIC. Overall, the structure and processes of quality assurance are developed on a solid base. Quality assurance is one of the eight areas that are explicitly elaborated on in the strategic plan of the institution (2021-2024).

The Commission for Evaluation and Quality Assurance (CEQA) seems to be the main body in charge in this field, it has been operating since 2008. It is mainly focused on QA policies, strategies and procedures, methodologies of evaluation of programmes, student evaluation, ensuring the quality of the teaching staff performance, evaluation of the learning process and so on.

The UAIC has developed a Quality Manual at the university level, now the plan is to do the same at the faculty level.

There are a number of evaluation activities at the UAIC and they are synergic with quality assurance and enhancement efforts. Among them, self-evaluation and peer evaluation seem to function well.

Students of all programmes are required to provide feedback as for the teaching activity and its main features. It is not clear how students are informed about what is happening with their feedback. Neither is it clear whether and how it is ensured that the teaching staff whose work is evaluated by the students have a chance to respond to student feedback, explain the reasons of their work/approach etc.

It appears, the research performance of some staff needs to be paid attention to more effectively within the evaluation process and further steps taken.

Quality Management Commissions are established at the faculties, they are in charge of the quality assurance processes. The whole quality assurance agenda falls under the portfolio of the vice-rector for QA, PhD programmes and extensions.

Recommendations:

- *Make sure students are informed about what is happening with the feedback they provided on teaching activity.*
- *Make sure teaching staff whose activity is evaluated by the students have a chance to respond to students on their feedback.*
- *Make sure performance of the academic staff leads to increased quality of research work overall at the UAIC.*

Final recommendation

I recommend providing the UAIC with institutional accreditation.

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